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Aloe mitriformis subsp. *distans*: the small mitre aloe

By Colin C. Walker

The genus *Aloe* is large and diverse with over 550 species, subspecies and varieties, together with numerous garden hybrids (Carter *et al.* 2011).

These range in size from the diminutive *Aloe descoingsii* with rosettes only 5-6 cm across to large branched trees such as *Aloe speciosa* at 6m tall. Incidentally, the really big tree aloes now have their own genus, *Aloidendron*.

Aloes occur naturally throughout Africa, Madagascar and Arabia, whilst a few species are naturalised in areas such as the Mediterranean coast. There are about 120 species of *Aloe* in South Africa (Van Wyk & Smith, 2003) and here I focus on *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans*.

Aloe mitriformis was first described in 1768 and now consists of three subspecies, of which subsp. *distans* is probably the most commonly encountered in cultivation. The first illustration as *Aloe mitraeformis* (β) *brevifolia* (Fig. 1, page 4) was

Fig. 1

Nº 1362.



published in 1811 by John Sims in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Sims, 1811). The following year it was described as a distinct species, *Aloe distans*, by the famous British botanist Adrian Hardy Haworth. Nearly two hundred years later, in 2002, it was reduced to a subspecies of *Aloe mitriformis*. Subspecies *distans* is distinguished from subsp. *mitriformis* and subsp. *comptonii* by being smaller and by its prominent marginal teeth.

Aloe mitriformis subsp. *distans* has a creeping habit and branches freely from the base forming dense clumps of sprawling stems up to 3

m long, shown here growing in a 20 cm diameter pot (Fig. 2, page 5). The leaves are roughly triangular in shape, bluish-green in colour and the leaf margins are armed with strong golden-yellowish teeth. The inflorescence has the flowers arranged in a dense head (termed capitate) whilst the individual flowers are relatively large at about 4 cm long and for my plant, deep dusky pink in colour (Fig. 3, page 6). However, according to Van Wyk & Smith (2003), flower colour can vary from dull orange-red to bright red.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The name *mitriformis* comes from the appearance of the rosette apex, being shaped liked a Bishop's cap or mitre, whilst the name *distans* comes from the long (distant) internodes (the structures where the leaf bases join the stem) (Grace *et al.* 2011).

The plant is easy to grow with no particular requirements, being a moderately slow grower that in time can develop into a large specimen. The plant shown here (Fig. 2, page 5) is just over 10 years old from seed at which point it flowered for the first time.

Aloe mitriformis occurs in the Western Cape, South Africa, where subsp. *distans* is restricted to a narrow coastal belt from Danger Point 150 km north of Cape Town, then northwards to St. Helena Bay (Van Wyk & Smith, 2003).

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Colin C. Walker
c.walker702@btinternet.com

Fig. 1. *Aloe mitraeformis* (β) *brevifolia* (from Sims, 1811).

Fig. 2. *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans* growing in a 20 cm diameter pot.

Fig. 3. Inflorescence of *Aloe mitriformis* subsp. *distans*.